

“Today Is Our Anniversary”

- I. Introduction: Today is our anniversary, liturgically speaking. Lent II three years ago was my first Sunday as your Priest-in-Charge here at Church of the Ascension. The Priest-In-Charge arrangement is defined by canon law, but if it were to be described in common parlance I'd call it an arrangement of “renting with the option to buy.” For those who may be new to Ascension or visiting today, the Priest-In-Charge, that would be me, is assigned to a parish by the Bishop, at the request of that parish, that would be you, Ascension, to provide spiritual leadership while the parish completes a Self-Study. At the end of the first two years of this arrangement, the parish Search Committee is charged with the duty to recommend to the Vestry whether the Priest-In-Charge should be asked to become the permanent Rector. When that time came, I was invited to become Ascension's seventh Rector and with joyful anticipation accepted your invitation. However, if such an agreement had not been reached, I would have stayed only one more year while you conducted a search. Had that occurred, today would have been my last day at Ascension. But God called us to be in ministry together, so, rather than a farewell, today is our anniversary.

- II. What do folks normally do on anniversaries? Simply put, they set special time aside to remember their shared past, to plan their shared future, and to give gifts. The shared memories we have in our significant relationships are often what we call screen memories, or memories that capture themes in one's life with another. For example, one of the memories I recollect in my relationship with Peg is the time we spent while dating in a small establishment down an alley off of Rush Street in Chicago. It seated no more than thirty people, had rubber chickens hanging from the ceiling, and a jukebox with songs sung by Billie Holiday. We spent hours there talking about our dreams for the future. It was an odd little place, but it fit us well. Many of the dreams we talked about in that place would later come true: dreams about adventures, children, and doing it our way. The children arrived, we have lived in and done many challenging and intriguing things in seven states, and together we have weathered the inevitable ups and downs and thrived, through the grace of God. We have been traveling hand-in-hand, and it has been glorious in no small part because it has been grounded in our shared faith.

Thus it is with our shared journey, you and I, here at Ascension. We have been traveling hand-in-hand for three years and, even though in chronological terms that is not long, these past three years have been eventful indeed and have given us many good memories. They have been eventful, I believe, because we are living out the promise of faith that brought us together in the first place. Listen to a small snippet of the first sermon I preached at Ascension: “Beginnings, such as the one we are experiencing this morning, are filled with hope and excitement. At the very time we are called to celebrate today, we are also called to begin our dialogue about our shared ministry . . . First, I want to affirm my deep belief that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is an honor, a privilege, and a source of great joy . . . second, I believe that the only time that ministry really works in a parish community is when it is a joint encounter . . . and third, it has been my experience that being a disciple of Jesus Christ requires taking risks that demand courage.” We have moved forward together with faith in Jesus Christ, shared ministry, and willingness to take risk together as the foundation of our work. These commitments have been and are carrying us forward into an exciting future.

III. But for a few moments I want to focus on what is at the heart of our journey together – it is God’s love for us. Before you had ever heard of Father Howard Hess or I had ever heard of Church of the Ascension, God had a plan that brought us together. God’s grace-filled goodness and direction is at the very core of how our shared ministry came about. God is ultimately the source of our shared ministry and will determine its outcome. Our part is to be faithful, listen to God’s voice, and act obediently and courageously as God’s people. This is what Luke wanted us to understand in today’s gospel reading. In Luke 13 Jesus was continuing on his journey to Jerusalem. He was teaching, curing the sick, and casting out demons. Friendly Pharisees came to him and warned him that he was in danger. Herod the Fox was out to get him. This danger was real. Remember that John the Baptist had already been killed and the track record for courageous prophets had not been good. Jesus knew that in the near future he would die. Look at his response. He said, go and tell this fox that I am doing my Father’s work and that my Father will determine the time and place of my death. Then, rather than retreating to a place of fear, Jesus lamented the future of Jerusalem and likened God to a mother hen who would protect her chicks if they would come to her. David Zerson, a Lutheran professor who was ministering in Tanzania, tells a story of actually watching how a mother hen took her chicks under her wings and then during the night protected them from the fox, giving up her life so that the chicks could survive. The analogy is clear: it was the love of Jesus Christ for us that

caused him to lay down his life. It is the same love that brought us together and has sustained us for the past three years.

- IV. What then have we learned in the past three years that we can readily carry over into our future? We have and continue to learn that God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--is trustworthy. Let me say that again. God is trustworthy. The bottom line ingredient in all love relationships, in all celebrations of anniversaries, and really in all hope for all shared futures, is trustworthiness. We see manifestations of God's trustworthiness all over the place here at Ascension: in the clergy and lay staff that God has sent us, in the incredibly gifted lay leadership of this parish, in the increasing evidence of our willingness to give sacrificially, and in the new Christian brothers and sisters that God is sending here. Because of the awesomeness of God, we can go about our business doing God's work as God continues to reveal that work to us. As long as we remain Christ-centered, motivated for shared ministry, and willing to take risks, God will take care of the outcome.
- V. Conclusion. The gift that we have to share this morning is that God is with us in our very midst today even as God was with us three years ago. Because God is with us, we do not ever have to be afraid. We are called to be faithful. We are called to make sacrifices. But we do not have to be afraid of how our efforts and our lives will end. Three years ago, in answer to your prayers and to my prayers about our respective futures, God brought us together. In the last month or so, in answer to the Vestry's prayers and the prayers of many of you, God has moved God's people to generosity and we're going to get our roof fixed and hire a youth minister. This same pattern of our faith and God's faithfulness to us is operating right now. Consequently, our shared ministry is bearing much fruit.

We must continue to pray. Specifically I would ask you to pray for the increasing presence of the Holy Spirit in our shared ministry here at Ascension. And please pray that God will continue to inspire excitement at Ascension about the many ministries here. Pray that God will continue to inspire greater and greater passion to act upon the faith that sustains us. Happy Anniversary. *Amen.*